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Source: *Military Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Winter, 1962-1963), pp. 171-177

Published by: Society for Military History

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1985612>

Accessed: 21/07/2009 17:14

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DAVID PARISH AND THE WAR OF 1812

BY J. MACKAY HITSMAN

THE New Englanders, who settled along the shore of the St. Lawrence River in northern New York state after 1800, initiated a brisk trade with Canada, exchanging their potash, flour and meat for manufactured goods brought up river from Montreal. This trade continued in open defiance of President Jefferson's Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts and even "Mr. Madison's War" did not stop it for long. As soon as the St. Lawrence froze over for the winter of 1812-1813 American farmers drove their sleighs across the ice to take advantage of the high prices offered by the British Army's Commissariat Department.¹ Because the thinly settled provinces of Upper and Lower Canada did not produce enough food for both soldiers and civilians, this clandestine trade became a year round affair.² The present story, however, merely concerns some of the activities of David Parish, the German-born land developer of St. Lawrence and Jefferson counties; in particular how he obtained immunity for his incipient ironworks at Rossie from no less a person than Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost, Governor-in-Chief and Commander of the Forces in British North America.

David Parish has been well described as "an international financial adventurer of the type that flourished during the Napoleonic era, when the spirit of nationalism had only begun to shackle men's thoughts and actions."³ Born in Hamburg, Germany late

in 1778 he grew to manhood at the right time to make the most of the changes in Europe. His English grandfather had turned a profitable mercantile business into a fortune by transferring operations from Scotland to Hamburg. Whether or not David Parish's ideas and scale of high living were too much for his own father and two elder brothers, he did set up for himself in Antwerp at the turn of the century. An appealing personality and never-failing resourcefulness, plus some useful tips from Napoleon's foreign minister, Talleyrand, soon enabled him to amass a fortune in his own right. The constant daring and optimism, which always made him ready to take a chance, brought him to Philadelphia in 1806, as American agent for a syndicate formed to transfer a large quantity of bullion belonging to the King of Spain from Mexico to Napoleon's coffers in Paris. The good offices of the London financial house of Baring Brothers ensured that the Royal Navy would not interfere with the actual shipment in neutral American ships.⁴ Readers of Hervey Allen's overly long and dull historical novel, *Anthony Adverse*, will recall this transaction and the appearance and re-appearance of a David Parish in a story which bear little resemblance to fact.⁵

By the summer of 1808 the bullion transfer was completed and David Parish received one quarter of the syndicate's profit, or \$1,000,000—which in those days was one million dollars. By this time he had talked himself into staying in the United States, which he had come to believe would be the only coun-

¹Michael Smith, *A Geographical View of the province of Upper Canada and promiscuous remarks upon the government, etc.* (Hartford, 1813), 101.

²Public Archives of Canada [hereinafter cited "P.A.C."] Q/128-1, Prevost to Bathurst, Aug. 27, 1814.

³Philip G. Walters and Raymond Walters, Jr., "The American Career of David Parish," *The Journal of Economic History*, IV (November, 1944), 149.

⁴*Ibid.*, 150-152. Also Richard Ehrenberg, *Das Haus Parish in Hamburg* (Jena, 1905), 106 *et seq.*

⁵Hervey Allen, *Anthony Adverse* (New York, 1933; Bantam Books, 1960).

try where a person could look forward to enjoy, for half a century at least, a state of tranquility and security. He purchased 200,000 acres in St. Lawrence and Jefferson counties for \$363,000 from Gouverneur Morris, who was a friend of his father, and other New York land speculators. Unlike them, he was interested in having his land developed and was to grant easy terms of payment to genuine settlers. Roads were soon to connect the settlements of Rome, Antwerp, Rossie, Ogdensburg and Parishville. Two schooners were built to ply the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario. Merino sheep were imported to graze the stoney acres facing the Thousand Islands. A grist mill, sawmill and distillery were erected at Parishville, while a brick-yard was opened at Ogdensburg. Workmen from Montreal built a mansion for Parish's own use at Ogdensburg. Here he spent a good deal of time each year. At other times a nephew from Scotland, John Ross, occupied the house. A young Belgian named Joseph Rosseel was, however, his full time agent at Ogdensburg.⁶

Late in 1809 a considerable deposit of iron ore was discovered near Rossie. Tests made at Utica indicated that this iron would make good castings. Land for an ironworks was then cleared where the Indian River emptied into Black Lake, about 25 miles southwest of Ogdensburg but only five or six miles from the St. Lawrence.⁷ Early in 1812 Parish visited the iron centre of Lancaster in Pennsylvania to seek advice on production problems and was put in touch with an experienced ironmaster from England named William Benbow. The latter was given a long term contract to superintend operations. Construction of a blast furnace—the first in

northern New York—was delayed, however, by President Madison's declaration of war against England on June 19, 1812.

Governor Daniel Tompkins of New York immediately ordered Brigadier-General Jacob Brown, a prosperous Quaker business man and land speculator from the region of Sackets Harbor, to take command of the northern frontier. Brown's reports soon emphasized the importance of having a strong garrison at Ogdensburg. Since enemy bateaux bringing supplies up the St. Lawrence from Montreal had to circumvent the last rapids only a few miles below, Ogdensburg would be an ideal spot from which to attack them.⁸

When Brigadier-General Brown arrived at Ogdensburg towards the end of September with his own small militia brigade and Captain Benjamin Forsyth's company of riflemen—the only American regulars in northern New York—to take personal command of the river defences, however, he found many of the inhabitants trying their best to ignore the fact that a war was going on, and particularly the existence of the small garrison of ragged militiamen. Canadians from Prescott were still crossing the St. Lawrence to shop at Parish's store and have tea or dinner at his mansion—under the protection of a white flag of truce.⁹

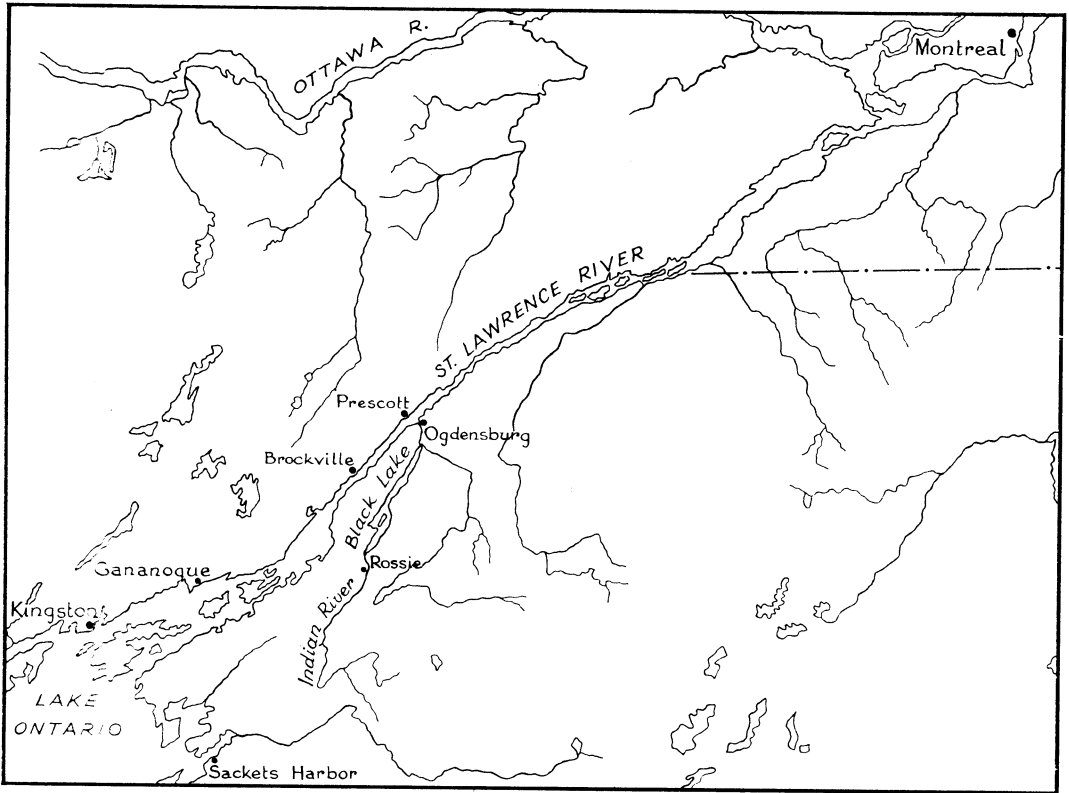
Brown soon put an end to this state of affairs. He ordered the shore batteries to fire at all convoys of enemy bateaux moving up river. Just before being moved to Ogdensburg, Forsyth's riflemen had made a successful attack on the Canadian staging point at Gananoque; now they ventured onto the river in boats to exchange shots with the small escorts of British regulars and Canadian militia.

⁶Raymond Walters, Jr. and Philip G. Walters, "David Parish: York State Land Promoter," *New York History*, XXXVI (April, 1945), 148-152.

⁷*Ibid.*, 153. Also information from New York State Museum and Science Service, The State Education Department, Albany, N. Y.

⁸Relevant correspondence is printed in Franklin B. Hough, *A History of Jefferson County in the State of New York, from the earliest period to the present time* (Albany, 1854), 579-585.

⁹*Ibid.*, 468.



This sudden display of hostility aroused the ire of Colonel Thomas Lethbridge at Prescott. This elderly British officer, who had been holding a sinecure as an Inspecting Field Officer of Militia in Lower Canada until the outbreak of war forced his appointment to the command of the Upper St. Lawrence, had then been warned not to engage the enemy deliberately: "On the contrary use very precaution to preserve the tranquility of that part of the Province which does not in itself afford an eligible position for offensive operations."¹⁰ Unfortunately Sir George Prevost's fear that any unnecessary operations would merely tend to drive the peace-loving Federalist voters into the ranks of the "war hawks" and result in unnecessary casualties

to his own numerically smaller forces, does not seem to have been appreciated by all his subordinates. In any event, the arrival from Montreal of two companies of Canadian Fencibles to provide a regular garrison for Prescott determined Colonel Lethbridge to retaliate against Ogdensburg itself.

With "the aid of an excellent glass of Mr. Parish," Brigadier-General Brown could watch the preparations being made at Prescott on Saturday, October 3.¹¹ The attack on Sunday morning was, however, a complete fiasco. Despite covering fire from their own shore batteries the Canadian Fencibles and the local militia hesitated when their boats were in mid-stream and were then turned back by the hail of grape shot from the

¹⁰P.A.C., C/688A, Baynes to Lethbridge, July 19, 1812.

¹¹Brown to Tompkins, Oct. 7, 1812 is printed in Hough, *A History of Jefferson County, op. cit.*, 424-425.

American guns. *The Montreal Herald* charitably called this "unlucky affair . . . a rash undertaking, as the force was not adequate to the attainment of the object."¹² In consequence Colonel Lethbridge was recalled to Montral and replaced by the younger and more capable Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Pearson.

David Parish, who had watched the enemy failure from a window of his store, almost immediately wrote to Governor Tompkins requesting that the defences of Ogdensburg be strengthened. Although recognizing the importance of this, Tompkins replied that "the command by the enemy of the water communication and the almost impassible state of the roads between the Black River and the St. Lawrence, will retard the occupation of Ogdensburgh, with a force proportioned to its importance, until spring. In the meantime I have exerted myself to enable the Inhabitants to act on the defensive so well as my feeble means and the immense range of the frontier to be guarded will allow."¹³ It soon seemed obvious to David Parish anyway that the United States must triumph, because Britain would not be able to spare enough aid from its struggle in Europe with Napoleon. "You will have heard of the bad figure we have hitherto made in our attacks on the Canadas," he wrote to his father, then resident in England. "More defeats will be experienced with our raw troops, but if the war takes another year, you may rely that the whole of Upper & a great part of Lower Canada will be in our possession, and that my house in Ogdensburgh will no longer stand on the frontier."¹⁴ With a fairly easy

mind, therefore, he returned to Philadelphia for the winter.

Around Christmas time Brigadier-General Brown and the members of his militia brigade returned to their homes, having served their required time. Only a few militia continued on service for the winter. But Forsyth's riflemen remained and continued to upset the border with their raids. Finally, on February 22, 1813, Lieutenant-Colonel "Red George" Macdonell led the garrison of Prescott, augmented the day before by two companies of the 8th (or King's) Regiment of Foot on their way up river, across the ice.¹⁵ Forsyth and his men were surprised at breakfast and forced to flee inland. Human nature being what it is, there was some plundering before Macdonell led his force back to Prescott. "At one time," Joseph Rosseel reported to David Parish, "they were carrying off some of my property and hurrying my person off to Canada when a British officer who knew me, happening to pass by my house, perceiving my embarrassment, rushed in, bid the ruffians desist and dispersed them."¹⁶ Since Forsyth's command was too weak to attempt re-occupation, he proceeded to Sackets Harbor. For the balance of the war, Ogdensburg was without an American garrison and soon the residents of Prescott were back shopping at Parish's store. Joseph Rosseel, John Ross and other neutral-minded inhabitants of Ogdensburg frequently crossed the river to dine with Lieutenant-Colonel Macdonell.

In his letter of March 2 to Colonel Decius Wadsworth, Commissary-General of Ordnance in Washington, respecting a contract to manufacture 300-400 tons of round shot at the ironworks being built at Rossie, Parish stated that as yet he knew no more about the

¹²*Ibid.* Also *The Montreal Herald*, Oct. 10 and Nov. 14, 1812.

¹³Tompkins to Parish, Oct. 9, 1812 is printed in *Public Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins, Governor of New York, 1807-1817, Military, III* (Albany, 1902), 163-164.

¹⁴Parish Letter Book IV, Parish to John Parish, Dec. 1, 1812 (Courtesy of New-York Historical Society, New York City).

¹⁵P.A.C., C/678, Macdonell to Harvey, Feb. 22 and 25, 1813.

¹⁶Parish Papers, Rosseel to Parish, Feb. 26, 1813 (Courtesy of The St. Lawrence University, Canton, N.Y.).

capture of Ogdensburg than had appeared in the press. "I must confess," he added, "that the Conduct of Capt. Forsyth in making incursions on the Canada shore, prepared me for that Event. I trust private Property will be respected, and that men of more Discretion & prudence will in future be Selected to Command on our frontiers."¹⁷ So certain was Parish that the United States would win, however, that a few days later he asked Colonel Wadsworth to let the Secretary for War know that was ready to help with any operations that might be undertaken in northern New York.¹⁸

At the moment he was fully engaged, along with the (French-born) Stephen Girard of Philadelphia and John Jacob Astor of New York, in helping to float (Swiss-born) Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin's first War Loan of \$16,000,000. This proved to be a success, to the United States Government which needed money to fight the war and to David Parish who made money by reselling bonds he had actually never had to pay for.

Negotiation for a contract to manufacture round shot at Rossie continued. Since the American conduct of the war in 1813 was not so successful as David Parish had anticipated, however, he dropped the whole matter at the last moment. The deciding factor seems to have been a hint from friends in Prescott that the ironworks might be attacked. On July 7 Parish wrote his ironmaster that he could see "no objection to finishing the Furnaces & going into blast as soon as your arrangement can be completed. I apprehend no attack from the other side if we confine ourselves to country work, & when I reach Ogdensburgh, I shall take the necessary means to make this Determination known, & to ascertain the Disposition of our opposite Neighbours."¹⁹

¹⁷Parish Letter Book IV, Parish to Wadsworth, March 2, 1813.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, March 11, 1813.

Upon learning that David Parish had arrived at Ogdensburg early in August the garrison commander at Prescott, once again Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Pearson, sent a local merchant, Mr. William Gilkinson, across the river "with a view of procuring such political information as Mr. P. might think proper to communicate. . . ." As Pearson reported to Sir George Prevost on August 9, "it is not improbable that by his means I may be enabled to learn something more interesting as Mr. Parish has had access and confidential interviews with those at the head of the United States Government".²⁰

Pearson's hopes were not misplaced. This visit, was, however, to provide Parish with his needed opening. On August 10 Parish sent over a long explanatory letter to Pearson requesting that Sir George Prevost be acquainted with the fact that the ironworks being erected at Rossie was intended for "country work only" and to benefit his own settlements.²¹ The reader may judge for himself whether the balance of this letter presented the true situation.

"As it is not unlikely that misrepresentation may have gone abroad and that the erection of works of this description, so near the lines, may be viewed with a suspicious eye by His Britannick Majesty's Commanders in Canada, I am very desirous of making Sir George Prevost acquainted with the True state of the case, and of conveying thro' you, to His Excellency, an assurance that no contract had been made or shall be entered into by me with the Government of the United States, or any of its Agents, for the manufacture and delivery of implements of war, by the said works, during the continuance of the existing hostilities between this Country and Great Britain, and that my word of honour is to be considered as herewith most

¹⁹Parish Letter Book IV, Parish to Rosseel, June 9, 1813; Parish to Benbow, July 7, 1813.

²⁰P.A.C., C/679, Pearson to Prevost, Aug. 9, 1813.

²¹P.A.C., C/14, Parish to Pearson Aug. 10, 1813.

solemnly pledged for the performance of said Engagement.

"As I have not the honour of being known to His Excellency I shall write and request my friend Mr. Isaac Todd of Montreal to address a line to Sir George Prevost which will, I trust, be calculated to create sufficient confidence, as to induce His Excellency to convey to me, thro' you, the assurance that the Works will be considered as private property and that no molestation will be experienced in completing them. I shall consider myself under particular obligations for your kind attention to my request at your earliest convenience, as I am very desirous of receiving His Excellency's determination on the above application, so that I may put a stop to the works in case the answer should not be favorable.

"I cannot conclude this letter without expressing to you the grateful sense I entertain, in common with all my friends here, for the honourable Sentiments expressed and the magnanimous conduct pursued by you, as relates to the private property on this side of the St. Lawrence. . . ."

David Parish's letter to Mr. Isaac Todd explained that Ogdensburg, where he planned to remain four or five weeks was "now perfectly tranquil, & there is no doubt of our remaining so, as long as we are not annoyed by the presence of American troops.—if you should find inducement to make an excursion up the St. Lawrence there is no obstacle whatever to your crossing over to this Place, & I need not add, that I shall be most happy to enjoy the pleasure of your Company under my roof."²² Parish's third letter dated August 10 was to McTavish, McGillvray & Company, also leading merchants of Montreal, requesting that certain of his personal

goods forwarded there by a Halifax firm should be sent on to William Gilkinson at Prescott.²³

On August 13 Lieutenant-Colonel Pearson forwarded David Parish's letter to Sir George Prevost's military secretary. His own covering letter suggested, however, that "some very substantial proof should be given before the favor is granted, particularly as these works have hitherto drawn many of our deserters from this shore".²⁴

Isaac Todd's letter of August 16 advised Prevost's civil secretary that David Parish's "Father resides at Bath, lives in a Hospital elegant manner & is said to be man of large fortune, he has sisters married in England & Scotland to respectable Gentlemen, a niece married to Mr. Ellice a friend of mine".²⁵ David Parish, the letter continued, "is connected with the Messrs. Barings of London, & there and in the States, he is esteemed a man of property & large fortune, so circumstanced, I suppose no consideration would induce him to forfeit his word of honour".

This correspondence followed Sir George Prevost to Upper Canada, where he had gone because of the critical military situation in the Niagara Peninsula. At Kingston, where an advanced headquarters had been established, the matter was discussed with the same Lieutenant-Colonel "Red George" Macdonell who had captured Ogdensburg in February. On September 4 Macdonell wrote privately to John Ross at Ogdensburg that Sir George Prevost was "as much disposed as ever to respect every species of private property if not forced by western aggressions to retaliate, which I trust will never be the case".²⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel Pearson had already been notified that "Mr. Parish's property should suffer no injury under these conditions." Macdonell added that he made "frequent

²²Parish Letter Book IV, Parish to Todd, Aug. 10, 1813.

²³Parish Letter Book IV, Parish to McTavish, McGillvray & Co., Aug. 10, 1813.

²⁴P.A.C., C/679, Pearson to Freer, Aug. 13, 1813.

²⁵P.A.C., C/14, Todd to Brenton, Aug. 16, 1813.

²⁶Parish Papers, MacDonell to Ross, Sept. 4, 1813.

inquiries about my Ogdensburg acquaintances" and, should the war end shortly, he hoped to see some of them "even without a white handkerchief."

In a letter of October 8, written from Philadelphia to his father, David Parish described his quiet stay at Ogdensburg and "how we kept up a friendly intercourse with our Canadian Neighbours".²⁷ In consequence of Sir George Prevost's promise of immunity, the number of workmen at Rossie had been augmented and the ironworks was nearing completion.

The foundry was soon finished but satisfactory iron castings could not be made. David Parish, who spent a quiet summer at

²⁷Parish Letter Book IV, Parish to John Parish, Oct. 8, 1813.

Ogdensburg in 1814, was finally forced to the realization that William Benbow must not be familiar with the methods required to smelt specular ore from the nearby mine (soft hematite with 50 percent or more iron). A few weeks before Parish sailed for Europe in the summer of 1816 the ironworks was leased to a New England firm which soon turned it into a successful venture. Although David Parish had planned only a short business trip, and a visit with his father, he was talked into joining a new banking firm in Vienna and never returned to make money in a peaceful United States. This firm failed during the financial crisis of 1825. Despairing of a comeback, and having lost much of his now ailing father's money also, David Parish jumped into the Danube on April 27, 1826.

MILITARY MEMORIALS

THE MARSHALL MEMORIAL

Plans for the Marshall Memorial Library and Museum near the Virginia Military Institute campus at Lexington, Virginia, are far advanced. Ground has been broken, the architect's plans are complete, and construction will begin in the near future. The building will house General George C. Marshall's papers, books, films, tape recordings and other records, as well as many of his personal effects and mementoes and those of some of his associates. Research and library facilities will be included. It is estimated that two and a half million dollars will be needed for the project: one-fifth of this sum for the building, and the remainder for an endowment fund for operation and maintenance. About half a million dollars have been subscribed. Former Virginia Governor John S. Battle heads a citizens committee to enlist a broad level of national participation in financing the memorial.

GETTYSBURG MILITARY PARK VISITOR CENTER

The new one million dollar Visitor Center was dedicated at Gettysburg National Military Park on 19 November 1962, the 99th anniversary of the dedication of the National Cemetery there by Abraham Lincoln. The Visitor Center, designed by the internationally renowned architectural firm of Richard J. Neutra and Robert E. Alexander, is located one mile south of the center of Gettysburg on U. S. Route 15, at the focal point of Pickett's Charge on the afternoon of 3 July 1862. One wing of the building will house the famous "Gettysburg Cyclorama" completed by the French painter, Paul Philippoteaux in 1884. The administrative wing features an observation platform from which a panoramic view can be obtained of the central part of the battlefield.